

New Windsor, NY – Today at a field hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Chairman John Hall (D-NY19) called on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to reduce the waiting time for veterans stuck in its overwhelming claims backlog by two-thirds.

“These veterans have mortgages, medical bills, and tuition bills for their children’s education,” said Hall. “The bill collectors don’t wait 6 months, 2 years, or 5 years to collect—you have to pay them every month. The VA must meet the same standard. I want them to cut the waiting time from six months to two months, and someday even be able to turn around a claim in 30 days.”

The VA currently maintains a backlog of over 600,000 cases. Due to funding shortfalls over the past five years, the backlog and waiting times became exacerbated to the point of unmanageability. The current average waiting periods at all levels in the VA disability benefits system are staggering:

- 177 days at the Regional Office
 - 751 days at the Board of Veterans Appeals
 - 240 days at the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
- “This backlog is simply unacceptable and the VA has shown little ability or interest in reducing the number of claims pending a decision,” said Hall. “These veterans stood up for our country when asked, and now it’s our turn to stand up for them.”

The backlog New York veterans face is even worse than that suffered by the average veteran in the U.S. The New York City VA Regional Office’s performance on processing claims is far behind the national average. Currently, it averages 255 days to complete a claim and has a pending backlog of 9,638 claims (20% higher than its goal of 7,952).

“The New York VA is working with one arm tied behind its back due to a hiring freeze that began in 2001 through January 2006 to comply with federal cuts to VA funding,” said Hall. “The New York office’s accuracy rating is 83 percent, meaning 17 percent of veterans are getting thrown into the hamster wheel of the appeals process which can take years to complete.”

The New York Regional Office has said it needs at least a third more employees (40-50) to deal with the number of claims it currently has and the number of claims anticipated. “The men and women who have suffered physically, mentally and financially for months and years while waiting for their benefits from the VA are the same men and women who stood up and served their country when they were needed,” said Hall. “It’s sickening that they are now made to jump through hoop after administrative hoop just to receive the basic care and benefits they have more than earned with their sacrifice. Fulfilling our pledge to them when asked is the least we as a grateful nation can do.”

Hall was joined by other Members of the Subcommittee and by U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey at the rare field hearing held at New Windsor Town Hall in Orange County.

Testimony was heard from local veterans who suffered financial and other problems as a result of delays in receiving their veterans claim decision, from a representative of the Veterans Administration, and representatives from a number of Veterans Service Organizations.